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ABSTRACT

In a disadvantaged school, a newspaper with an unbiased policy of focusing on the school's conditions, problems, activities, and other information relevant to the students' interest will help to build the students' sense of self-respect, pride, and participation in the school. Editorials can stress outstanding local achievements as well as honest appraisals of current events, such as racial incidents or the Poor People's Campaign. All students should be encouraged to work for the newspaper which should be easily available to everyone. (JM)

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The Role Of The Newspaper In A Disadvantaged School

By Steven Schrader

The following article was written during the summer of 1968 at the School of Journalism at Syracuse University where the author had a Newspaper Fund Fellowship of the Wall Street Journal. He teaches English, journalism, and remedial reading at Roosevelt High School (enrollment 5,600) in the Bronx, New York. His paper, "The Square Deal," comes out six times a year.

If it still has an office and money enough to publish, the paper in a disadvantaged school is one of the few remaining institutions which can help bring a sense of unity and pride to the students. The adviser, however, faces conflicting alternatives. He wants to improve the school's image by pointing to school achievement, but he also wants to reflect the total school life, which means reporting unpleasant facts, too.

The administration, if it is at all like most administrations, wants to put on a good appearance. If the principal writes a letter in the paper, his tone will be one of optimistic cliches—we must all pull the oars together and we'll get ashore; show school spirit, join the G.O. He will expect the paper to be written in a similar spirit. Such a tone is guaranteed to bore students immediately. They have heard about rowing boats ashore before, and they know that the particular journey they are on is not going to come to such an easy completion.

The newspaper staff itself tends to come from the few remaining middle class honor students, especially if journalism is an honors course. The staff wants the paper to be "just as good as it ever was," the equal of any other school, particularly the ones with better reputations. These students want to use big words and review esoteric books and movies.

The adviser has to educate the staff as well as recruit a more varied group of youngsters. Snobbery toward language and good journalism do not go together. Any paper ought to be written simply and clearly. The staff of a paper with an audience below reading grade level has to realize that its function is to serve the school. One of its main jobs is to find out what interests the majority of students and to incorporate these interests in the paper.

All students are encouraged to work for the paper. We run announcements, and give assignments to everyone who shows up, or at least ask to see samples of writing. We are not overwhelmed with volunteers, but

last year several boys submitted exciting poetry, and we ran articles on them. One boy was a black militant, and the article explained how he came to write the poems and why he felt the way he did.

The staff has to work within the school's problems, and try, in fact, to use the school's problems to make the paper meaningful and relevant. In a large and busy building students do not know the courses of study, the types of degrees, and the options available to them. They may not even know the location of the library. So the school paper should be a place to turn to for basic information.

Chances are, a large city school has several special or experimental programs. At my school, for instance, there are a work-study group, an intensive reading clinic, a College Discovery Program, and a division of the State Employment Service. We try to run a feature on one every other issue.

The front page should include more than just news stories about the outstanding students and scholarship winners. Basketball at my school is enormously popular, so when two players made third team all-city we included this on the first page with action photos of each boy. Another article was about a girl competing for Queen of the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Students who distrust school will, in all logic, distrust the paper which is merely an extension of the school administration. To win trust in the paper, articles should offer an honest appraisal of conditions in the school. The adviser doesn't want to emphasize negative conditions, but he wants the paper to indicate truthfully what is happening in order to interest and arouse the students.

Two years ago a racial incident in Roosevelt's library made the front page of *The New York Times.* Since the school paper didn't come out five weeks afterward, we didn't run this as a news story. Instead the editor wrote an editorial explaining why the fight had happened. In such instances there are probably no set rules which can be made. Each adviser will use his own instincts. Mine are to encourage writing about things as they come up, whether the subject is race relations, narcotics, pregnancy, or cheating.

One challenge is coming up with features on the students. In a forthcoming issue I plan to get the staff to write an article on youngsters with Afro-American haircuts because an explanation will be beneficial and of interest to everyone. The administrators, teachers, and white students will understand why Negro students take pride in their blackness, and black students, in turn, will feel they are being treated with respect.

A remedial class I polled requested jokes, cartoons, fashions, and astrology. The staff tended to look down on such material, and managed only to come up with cartoons. We did, however, begin an inquiring photographer column. At first the tendency of the staff was to interview their friends, most of whom belonged to the school elite. After a little while they found average and "troublesome" students, too. They discovered that the average student was shy and distrustful and had to be convinced that there was nothing wrong in having his picture in the paper. So attitudes of both sides were changed.

We try to write editorials that are not accusatory and critical—have school spirit and so on. We stress outstanding achievements, honest appraisals of what is happening—like the racial incident, or topical events—like the The Poor People's Campaign.

Two of our more successful articles

were an interview with Bill Cosby, and a book review of Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land.* This year we plan to review *The Autobiography of Malcom X.*

A major problem is that distribution of the paper is based on G.O. membership. Since students we want most to reach do not belong to the G.O., they don't get to see the paper. We partially solve this problem by ordering six hundred extra copies and add five extra papers for each class. The cost is small and well worth it.

We also Scotch-tape a copy of the paper, page by page, outside the office. Lots of students stop to read the paper, some even drop in to offer criticism.

The adviser to a disadvantaged school paper will, if he's lucky and hard-working, surmount his problems and find special rewards in his job. He'll be where the action is—urban education. He'll also find that he can mean something to thousands of youngsters who have a great many needs.

The goal of the paper in such a setting is to approach everything with an open mind. Everything is grist for the mill—from the Afro-American haircut to the latest dance. The acceptance will be appreciated by the students, and the ultimate goal of helping to build self-respect and pride in the school, and a feeling of belonging, will be accomplished.